
TMJ Arthrocentesis Recovery Guide

What to expect, plus key do's and don'ts (follow your surgeon's specific instructions if they differ).

What arthrocentesis is

TMJ arthrocentesis is a minimally invasive procedure where sterile fluid is used to lavage (wash) the joint space. This can help reduce inflammation, improve mobility, and relieve pain in selected cases.

What to expect after the procedure

- Swelling and soreness around the joint are common for several days.
- Ear fullness, a “plugged” sensation, or mild clicking can occur and usually improves as swelling settles.
- A temporary change in your bite can occur. It is normal to notice an open bite or a different bite contact as fluid and swelling settle within the joint space.
- Bruising can occur near the cheek or jawline.
- Rarely, temporary facial nerve weakness can occur (most often from swelling or local anesthetic effects). This typically improves as swelling decreases. Call us if weakness is worsening or if you cannot close an eye fully.

Diet guidance

Even if your pain improves quickly, do not advance to a full/chewy diet until you are cleared by your surgeon. Chewing too early can irritate the joint and slow recovery.

- Stick to a soft / minimal-chew diet as instructed (examples: yogurt, smoothies, soups, scrambled eggs, mashed foods, well-cooked pasta).
- Avoid gum, tough meats, chewy breads, crunchy snacks, and wide bites.
- Hydration matters: drink steadily throughout the day.
- Avoid straws for the first few days unless your surgeon says otherwise (suction can increase discomfort).

Do's

- Use cold compresses for the first 24–48 hours if recommended (then transition to warm compresses if instructed).
- Take prescribed medications as directed (anti-inflammatory, pain medication, etc.).

General education only. Your care plan may differ based on your anatomy and procedure

- Keep jaw movements gentle at first. If you were given stretching/physical therapy instructions, follow them exactly—do not add extra exercises unless cleared.
- Sleep with your head slightly elevated for the first 1–2 nights to help swelling.
- If guiding elastics were placed, wear and change them exactly as instructed.

Don'ts

- Do not sleep on the treated side for the first several nights (or longer if advised).
- Do not clench, grind, chew gum, or test the joint with repetitive opening/closing.
- Do not force your jaw open wide (big yawns, large sandwiches, or wide bites) early on.
- Do not resume strenuous exercise for 24–48 hours unless cleared.

When to call our office

- Fever over 101°F (38.3°C) or chills.
- Worsening swelling after initial improvement, or swelling that becomes firm/hot.
- Increasing pain not controlled with prescribed medications.
- Persistent vomiting or inability to keep fluids down.
- New/worsening facial weakness, trouble closing an eye completely, or any neurologic concern.
- A bite change that is severe, worsening, or not improving over the first several days.

This guide is for general education. Your specific recovery plan may vary based on your diagnosis and intra-operative findings. If you are unsure whether something is safe, contact our office.

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